

Where Do We Find The Meaning Of Life?

by Bob Weekley

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

Presented October 8, 2017

As people become conscious of the fact that they have one life to live, many sense a need to find a deeper meaning for their life than mere existence. What is “meaning” and where is meaning found? In Religion? Art? Science? Work? Adventure? Play?

Bulletin quotations:

“Throw open the windows of your soul to the sun... It is about time you realized the nature of the universe (of which you are a part.)”

Marcus Aurelius, 121-180, Roman Emperor

“The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why.”

Mark Twain

Songs:

#361: “Enter, Rejoice, and Come In.”

#373 A Firemist and a Planet

#331 Life is the Greatest Gift of All

My challenge:

Trying to explain the “meaning of life” might be a joke.

Monty Python thought so and created a great spoof of a film about “The Meaning of Life.”

The New Yorker cartoon in your bulletin today might have the joke right.

Previous talk on “Meaning of Life:” 4 years ago -- July 28, 2013 -- Remember?

So maybe this is MOL part II?

Today I want to take a perspective less on the philosophical level and more on the personal level.

I believe there is a connection here to our spiritual lives.

Question: Where do YOU, and where do I, find the meaning for our lives?

What makes our lives worthwhile?

As we become conscious of the fact that we have but one life to live, we sense a need to find a deeper *meaning* for life than mere existence.

But, what is “meaning” and where is meaning found?

“Meaning” is defined as “implied significance,” or as an “important quality or purpose.”

In other words, WHAT IS THE POINT?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE? IS A SINGLE LIFE “SIGNIFICANT?”

Thousands of generations of people just like you and me have come and gone on this planet.

Is life just about existing?

Eating, drinking, working, playing, aging, and dying?

And being replaced by generations of others who will do the same?

That can seem pretty mundane.

Many people are drifting through life with no real sense of what their life is. ...

No *coherent understanding* of their existence

Easily led by superstition and mythology

Why is that? Do some people care and others do not?

Have people been disappointed / disillusioned by the explanations from theology? Science? Philosophy?

Is life so mysterious that we give up on understanding it? Or don't want to make the effort?

Historically many have sensed a need for meaning.

Evidence: invention of religions, burials, cultural rituals, ...

Just think how religion has dominated the world, and the history of the world!

And still does!

But for us – in 2017 ...

Does meaning of life matter?

What is the GOOD of seeking the MOL?

What is the downside of NOT bothering with the question?

Thomas Merton, philosophically influential Roman Catholic Monk – author of some 70 books on spirituality, a questioning Christian...

His writing and study pursued an understanding of Taoism, Buddhism, and other religions of the world...

gives us some help on our question.

(Read Merton quote: “I Must Adapt Myself to Objective Reality.”)

I MUST ADAPT MYSELF TO OBJECTIVE REALITY

Our nature imposes on us a certain pattern of development which we must follow if we are to fulfill our best capacities and achieve at least the partial happiness of being human. This pattern must be properly understood and it must be worked out in essential elements. Otherwise, we fail. But it can be stated very simply, in a single sentence: We must know the truth, and we must love the truth we know, and we must act according to the measure of our love. What are the elements of this “pattern” I speak of? First, and most important of all: I must adapt myself to objective reality. Second, this adaptation is achieved by the work of my highest spiritual faculties – intelligence and will. Third, it demands expression when my whole being, commanded by my will, produces actions which, by their moral vitality and fruitfulness, show that I am living in harmony with the true order of things.

Thomas Merton, US Roman Catholic Monk, 1915-1968

* * *

There, we have it. “Objective reality!” That is the answer!

I provided a quotation from Emperor Marcus Aurelius the bulletin.

Here is the fuller version:

“Throw open the windows of your soul to the sun!

It is about time you realized the nature of the universe (of which you are a part.)...

Your days are numbered.”

This is where we find the “coherence” I spoke of.

It refers to the actual, physical *context* of our lives.

So, what is this *objective reality* and this *context*?

We are living in the age of the greatest explosion of knowledge in human history.

Objective reality is that we can now know – through observation and analysis that our universe had a finite beginning some 14 billion years ago;

That the Earth was formed some 4.5 billion actual years ago from cosmic dust...

That primeval life formed some 3.5 billion years ago, but

That modern humans only evolved into existence some 160,000 years ago – only the last .004% of Earth's history.

Objective reality is that we did not exist before we were born and we will cease to exist when we die.

Yes, I know. Other ancient hypotheses abound.

Objective reality is that the universe is governed by coherent and symmetrical physical laws that have been and are being discovered and proven.

Objective reality is that the atoms that make up everything in our world are mostly space.

The nucleus – the “matter” part of an atom is about 1/1,000 the size of the atom's electron cloud.

And that nucleus is made up of both matter and antimatter that self destructs.

Objective reality is that there is no magic.

Now these are *objective realities* ... BEAUTIFUL realities.

Maybe some find it easier to imagine a creator guy who made people and birds and bugs so he could be worshiped.

That's an awesome story invented by people who believed the world was obviously flat and heaven was in the sky above.

The Roman Poet Horace, in 20 BCE, first used the phrase, *sapere aude*, translated: “Dare to Know.”

In 1784, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, used those same words to sum up the program of the Enlightenment: *sapere aude* – “dare to know” -- meaning to have the courage to think for yourself – to look for the “objective reality”.

Kant and others used reason to attack superstition, bigotry, and religious fanaticism...

That is our challenge – integrating “objective reality” into our outlook.

That is where we then find the meaning of life and existence.

It is sad to know that so many want to deny *objective reality* and cling to stories and superstitions.

According to the Pew Research Center, one-third of the American general public rejects the reality of evolution ...

They believe that “humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.”

The beginning of time!

I spoke of the need for a coherent understanding of the world – i.e., being logical and consistent.

How could such a denial of *objective reality* be satisfying?

Embracing *objective reality* does not prevent embracing the concept of divinity; it does not deny that there may be *purpose* in the world that we do not fully understand.

I quoted Thomas Merton, a monk who believed in God.

But he did not embrace a concept of God that is in conflict with *objective reality*.

The Roman Catholic Church and many other world religions embrace the scientific explanations for evolution and the origin of the universe.

Those who reject objective reality are those who, like televangelist Jim Bakker, say that God sent Hurricane Harvey to punish Houston for sin;

Or pastor Rick Joyner who stated that such storms don't "happen by accident,"

Or Pastor Kevin Swanson who said that the path of Hurricane Irma could have been altered by God if the U.S. Supreme Court quickly made abortion and gay marriage illegal.

Political commentator Ann Coulter suggested that the Texas hurricane may have been caused by the former Houston mayor being a lesbian.

Pat Robertson warned us that gay tourists at Disney World could cause a meteor strike.

And then we, ourselves, sometimes petition a divinity to intervene with the physical laws of the universe, "just this once," to save us from harm or disgrace.

Now, this is extreme rejection of *objective reality*!

Albert Einstein was the ultimate man of science, but he also possessed a deep sense of spirituality.

Einstein embraced *objective reality* in this way:

Quote: "A human being is part of the whole called by us *universe*... We experience ourselves, our thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us...

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and **the whole of nature in its beauty.**"

End of quote.

Plato, born about 428 BCE, used the most wonderful allegory that has been passed down through the ages. He pictured a group of people living in a cave.

A fire was the only illumination, and it cast shadows of the people on a wall.

Their only knowledge of their world was limited to their observation of the shadows on the wall.

That was their only “reality.”

But one day when some were taken out of the cave and saw the world in its *objective reality*, its full dimensions and colors, they were afraid and wanted to return to the cave where they could be comfortable with the unreal “reality” they had always known.

So, I believe it is my spiritual task to be aware of, and learn of the only world I can know, and to see beauty, and complexity, in its workings.

One of the world’s greatest physicists who discovered and proved many of the basic laws that govern our world was James Clerk Maxwell.

He delved deeper into the physical laws that govern our world than anyone before. He left open the idea of “divine processes of nature,” yet he unraveled the hidden secrets of those processes. How did Maxwell reconcile the *objective reality* and the *mystery*?

Maxwell wrote:

Quote “Happy is the man who can recognize in the work of today a connected portion of the work of life and an embodiment of the work of Eternity. ... Thus ought man to be an impersonation of the divine process of nature, and to show forth the union of the infinite with the finite, ... nor yet shutting out from his view that which is eternal, knowing that Time is a mystery... .” End quote.

Embrace *objective reality*. And, embrace *mystery*.

Bob Weekley – October 8, 2017